

Virginia Zoo

Animal Services Department Meeting Re: Elephant Management Program Sunday, February 5, 2012

Attendee: Greg Bockheim (Exec. Director), Amanda Guthrie (Zoo Veterinarian), Joe Roman (Mammal Curator), Roger Sweeney (Zoo Assistant Director), Jill Tarrant (Zookeeper), Jody Watkins (Elephant Program Manager)

Meeting start: 2 pm.

Report by: Greg Bockheim opened the meeting to discuss a concern raised of excessive force that was described as being part of the Virginia Zoo Elephant Management Program. This issue was brought to our attention during discussions regarding data collection for an elephant behavior study. What was brought up in those meetings was described as an “elephant beating” and that such treatment was approved as part of the Zoo’s elephant management program.

Each of the staff present the day of the occurrence was asked to give a description of what had taken place.

Report by: Dave McDougal, volunteer keeper aid since 2008

Dave estimated that the time of this occurrence to be early 2010.

Dave reviewed the zookeeper tools used in the elephant area. Said that on the day of the occurrence Jill briefed Jody on the elephant Cita’s status and said that Cita was not responding to the bath routine. The gist of what Jody implied to Jill is that Cita needed to be reprimanded. Jody and Jill proceeded with the morning elephant stall cleaning routine and then left the room and returned with elephant tethering equipment (chains and ropes). Dave was told to “sit and stay there” in a chair under the hydraulic door controls (where volunteers often sit during some procedures). Cita was chained by a front leg and tethered with a rope from the opposite back foot. The slack was then pulled tight rendering the elephant essential immobile. Jill was at the head of the elephant and Jody at its midsection. Jody screamed a command to the elephant and then hit her with an ankus as hard as he could on the midsection. This was repeated several times. Once Jody and Jill were finished, and safely out of the way of the elephant, Dave said he challenged them asking why they would do such a thing. He said Jody seemed to be shocked by his inquiry and told him that he would never understand how appropriate that was. After several inquiries to Zoo staff, attending an elephant managers conference, performing a Riddle’s elephant farm 3-day visit and through independent investigation of various sources (Arkansas Zoo free contact experience, American vet association inquiry and research into the history or elephants in captivity)) Dave understood that this can be part of an elephant management program if determined necessary by individual zoos. He did feel that the Zoo’s executive Director should know about it and that is why he brought it to our attention during a meeting about data collection for the elephant behavior study on January 24, 2012

Report by: Jill Tarrant, Zookeeper at the Virginia Zoo since fulltime hire July 2001.

Does not recall the specific incident described by Dave. Says that the method described for tethering the elephants is accurate although the animals are given enough slack so that they can stand but cannot turn around.

Jill mentioned that elephant program policy states that they are to request a specific behavior of an elephant 3 xs. If the behavior is not preformed the zookeeper is to move on to another request or take a break from training. Jill said that she personally avoids hitting an elephant at all costs as it was not part of the elephant free contact management and is not necessary for protected contact management.

Reported by: Jody Watkins, Virginia Zoo Elephant Program Manager since hire in February 2002.

Jody said we never beat our elephants and they are never hit while laying on their side. When tethered there is always enough slack so that the elephant can move freely. Restrained contact is approved by curators. Free contact has occurred for emergency situations at the Virginia Zoo (To give Lisa adiquine, for walks when Cita had colic and for the safe process of Monica's humane euthanasia).

Closing remarks by: Greg Bockheim

Incidents like this are perceived differently by different people. We need to all come to agreement to define the treatment of our elephants and the tools we use to work and communicate with them. We need to do what is right for elephants and to treat them the way Zoo visitors and our colleagues would agree with and understand.

To provide more clarity to the Virginia Zoo Elephant Management Program, Zoo management instituted the following revision to Elephant Management Program on February 2, 2012 immediately after this occurrence was revealed to zoo management. All animal services staff working in the elephant area and their curators must sign in agreement with this policy.

Elephant Management Program Policy Revision

The following policy changes take affect in the Virginia Zoo Elephant Management Program as of today.

- 1) Striking an elephant with an ankus or any similar object is now forbidden. It is not acceptable to strike an elephant as a form of positive punishment or to establish a dominance based relationship. An ankus or similar object may only be used within the context of operant conditioning training as a cue used to communicate a requested behavior from an elephant in the form of pushing, tapping or pulling without excessive force.
- 2) The Virginia Zoo Elephant Management Program safety policies must be adhered to at all times. Specifically, a protected contact work environment must be maintained and no employee is allowed to enter space occupied by an elephant except under individual instruction by a curator and only under exceptional or emergency circumstances.

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